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PP RUEHIK
DE RUEHMZ #0034/01 0540829
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FM AMCONSUL MUNICH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5048
INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
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RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 0449

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUNICH 000034

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PTER](#) [EINT](#) [KISL](#) [XF](#) [XD](#) [GM](#)

SUBJECT: ARAB MEDIA, ONLINE CHAT ROOMS AND THE MUNICH SECURITY CONFERENCE

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Summary

¶1. (U) The handshake between Prince Turki al Faisal, the former head of Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Service, and Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon off stage but in public view at the Munich Security Conference (Munich, February 5-7, reported septels) drew the attention of Arab websites, including jihadist chat rooms. Despite this "controversial" event, ConGen Munich's informal survey of Arab online media revealed that the MSC came up only 13 times in jihadist chat rooms and included mentions of the comments by Iran's Foreign Minister Motakki and discussions on the political reintegration of moderate Taliban. This lack of interest suggested that the conference has not yet captivated the jihadist chat rooms despite the relevant subject matter and participation of important leaders from the region. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) From February 5 to 7 the 46th Munich Security Conference (MSC) welcomed international security experts and politicians from Europe, America, the Middle East and China, who discussed major security policy issues such as resource security, nuclear proliferation, stability in the Middle East and NATO's new Afghanistan strategy.

After the three-day meeting, Munich's Political section visited the following jihadist chat rooms: al-Faloja (al-faloja.info); al-Medad (almedad.com); Ana al-Muslm (muslm.net); al-Ma'ark (m3ark.com); al-Hanein (hanein.info); as-Ansar (as-ansar.com). We also browsed through Arab news websites (e.g. Al Jazeera), online editions of newspapers, as well as Islamist news sites/chat rooms (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood) to see if and how they reported or discussed the conference.

¶3. (SBU) Given Iran's growing regional influence, news on the country's nuclear program and Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki's Friday evening informal remarks at the MSC were followed but not emphasized by Arab media. However, another incident during the Munich Security Conference (MSC) received significantly more attention: the handshake between Prince Turki al Faisal, the former head of Saudi Arabia's Intelligence Service, and Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon. Ayalon had begun his talk alleging that "a representative of a country with a lot of oil" had objected to share the stage with an Israeli and that therefore two separate Middle East panels had been set up. In the question and answer session Prince Turki stood up and claimed that it was not he who had objected to sharing the stage with an Israeli. Ayalon responded saying "if indeed it was not he who objected to my being here with him, I would welcome him to shake my outstretched hand." Ayalon then went off stage, walked toward the prince and shook his hand. (NOTE: In fact, the objections had come from the Turkish delegation, based on a diplomatic dispute between Israel and Turkey.)

¶4. (SBU) According to one article it was the first time that pictures of a handshake between a representative from Saudi Arabia and Israel were shown in the media. In the "al-Hanein" jihadist forum a posting about the handshake generated a few angry comments. In the "Ana al-Muslim" jihadist forum three articles from various sources were posted regarding the handshake, but they did not provoke any comments so far. A few other Islamist media outlets and chat rooms mentioned or discussed the handshake, voicing strong condemnation.

¶5. (SBU) Obviously aware of the gesture's "controversial" nature, Prince Turki had issued a press statement already one day after the handshake, in which he stressed that the handshake should not be mistaken as recognition of Israel.

¶6. (SBU) Another brief discussion in the "Ana al-Muslim" forum was sparked by the planned re-integration of "ordinary" Taliban into Afghan society as proposed by Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul at the MSC. One participant, sympathetic to the Saudi government, criticized Al Qaeda and expressed his hopes for a reconciliation between the Taliban led by Mullah Omar and the Karzai government. The other participants ridiculed him for this statement.

¶7. (SBU) Overall the MSC was mentioned in 13 postings on jihadist chat rooms. Most of the time participants posted articles from other news outlets/agencies, such as Al Jazeera, DPA, AFP, or Reuters. Besides the issues mentioned above, responses to the articles in these chat rooms - if there were any - were unrelated to the MSC and consisted of generic praises for the Taliban, the "mujahedeen" and the like.

COMMENT

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¶8. (SBU) The handshake between Ayalon and Faisal is an example of the unexpected encounters and discussions which the informal setting and the mixture of former and current government leaders at the MSC can stimulate. The presence of TV cameras, the online live streaming of the event and platforms like YouTube make news and pictures spread fast, which apparently prompted Faisal's quick caveats and explanations. While this incident along with other factors caused an uptick in attention the MSC receives from Arab media and chat rooms, this needs to be put in context. In general, based on the fact that the overall number of chat room responses to the articles mentioning the MSC was small, it seems the jihadist chat rooms still do not have the Munich Security Conference on their screens.

TRIBBLE